

Navigating Linguistic and Cultural Diversity at Work: Insights from Chinese Construction Workers in Algeria

Dynamique de la diversité linguistique et culturelle en milieu de travail : étude de cas des travailleurs chinois dans le secteur de la construction en Algérie

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Abstract

Algeria is now serving as the host to foreign labor for the many infrastructure projects taking place throughout the country. However, with the emergence of multicultural work sites come significant communication issues between employees which are primarily caused by language differences, culture clash, and lack of institutional support. This paper seeks to provide insight into the communication difficulties that Chinese construction workers experience when working in Algeria. It also discusses how these communication obstacles impact day-to-day interactions and overall productivity. The results of a thematic analysis of data collected via interviews with some of the Chinese construction workers in Algeria indicate that language barriers and cultural differences contribute to a social distance and disruption to work flow. Due to a lack of formal communication assistance available to them, many workers rely upon using gestures, translation apps, and colleagues for assistance in overcoming these barriers. This study stresses

the need for effective and inclusive communication methods as well as intercultural sensitivity when managing multicultural teams, such as those found in the construction industry which generally requires a large amount of labor intensive workers.

Keywords:

Algeria; Chinese workers; Intercultural communication; language barriers; Multicultural workplace.

Resumé (in French)

Bien que l'Algérie ait accueilli une main-d'œuvre internationale dans le cadre de ses infrastructures de développement, il faut noter qu'il est apparu plusieurs environnements multiculturels de travail, ce qui a entraîné des problèmes de communication liés en majeure partie au problème des barrières linguistiques, malentendus culturels et manque d'une aide institutionnelle suffisante. Dans le présent travail sera analysée la question des difficultés de communication avec des ouvriers chinois de la construction en Algérie. Le travail permet de voir de quelle façon ces problèmes affectent le processus de travail et la productivité globale. Sur la base de l'analyse thématique des matériaux, obtenus dans le cours des entretiens, il sera montré que, du fait de la faible maîtrise de la langue et des différences culturelles, il existe une sorte de distance sociale ainsi que troubles de travailleur. Sans aide officielle, les ouvriers se débrouillent souvent avec l'aide du mimétisme, application de traduction et la participation active de collègues.

Mots clés (in French)

Algérie ; barrières linguistiques ; Communication interculturelle ; milieu de travail multiculturel ; travailleurs chinois ;

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1. INTRODUCTION

The globalization of the workforce has resulted in more diversified work environments, especially in massive infrastructure development initiatives. The inclusion of foreign workers in Algeria has resulted in multicultural workplaces where cross-cultural communication has emerged as an essential issue. In many of these environments, one of the crucial concerns is cross-cultural communication, especially if the employees do not have a common language and culture background. Language can sometimes be a significant barrier to effective interaction, and cultural differences can result in misinterpretations regarding how employees should conduct themselves at work. This problem is especially common in labor-intensive industries like construction.

For Chinese construction workers, being members of the global workforce, it is challenging to communicate with the local workforce due to linguistic and cultural obstacles. This paper focuses on the communication problems that Chinese workers face while working in the Algerian construction industry and explores how they cope with these issues. It also attempts to give suggestions for creating more inclusive communication practices in organizations

2. Literature Review

Communication is a process of sharing information, ideas and emotions that helps shape understanding. According to Hall (1976), communication encompasses more than just spoken language; it also considers things like context, nonverbal behaviour and cultural patterns. In Hall's view, intercultural communication means navigating the differences that exist between high-context cultures (where meaning tends to be implicit) and low-context cultures (where the

meaning of communication tends to be explicit). Similarly, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) see communication as being culturally embedded in a way that requires cultural sensitivity to differences between one culture and another. Hofstede (2001) has a different view about communication being an exchange of messages between different cultures; thus, misunderstandings between individuals based on dimensions such as individualism vs. collectivism or on power distance occur. The above statements reveal that communication is not universal but is influenced by the cultural context of the communicators.

2.1. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

The workplace is growing to be more diverse so understanding cultural differences is important for effective interaction. Hofstede's theory of cultural dimension identifies six different dimensions which can help in bridging cultural gaps. The first dimension is the Power Distances Index (PDI) which measures how much power is distributed unequally between individuals in a culture. Countries with a high PDI have centralized power structures (e.g., China and Arab nations) while countries with a low PDI promote more equality and encourage participative decision-making (e.g., Austria and Denmark). The second dimension, Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV), looks at whether an individual is prioritised over the collective. The United States prioritises individuals while China and many Arab countries place value on loyalty to the group and the well-being of the community as a whole. The third dimension, Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), examines how a culture deals with uncertainty. A high UAI culture prefers to rely on established formats, rules and procedures to reduce uncertainty, while a low UAI culture will accept greater ambiguity and take risks. The fourth dimension, Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS), examines a culture's view of gender roles and values. In masculine cultures, achievement dominates, and competition is encouraged. In

feminine cultures, the quality of life, community and care prevail. Finally, the Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation (LTO) measures whether a culture has a larger ability to focus on the future and the rewards it can provide or its tradition. Long-term oriented cultures promote thriftiness and flexibility while short-term oriented cultures emphasize heritage and instant satisfaction. Sixth, Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR) describes how societies deal with a sense of satisfaction. Cultures that are indulgent permit greater personal freedom and pleasure than restraint-oriented cultures, which place more focus on social regulations and duties than on pleasure. These dimensions play an important role in helping one navigate the wealth of cultural diversity throughout today's global work environment.

2.2. Hall's High and Low Context Cultures

Hall divides cultures into two categories: high-context and low-context cultures. In his book, *The Silent Language* (1959), he discusses how different approaches to communication affect the way people interact with one another. High-context cultures rely on non-verbal communication, shared understanding of a situation, and past experiences, rather than on actual words to communicate. Because these forms of indirect communication help to build relationships between people, they also promote feelings of connection and togetherness among people in the same social or cultural group. Therefore, an individual's identity will often be tied to their social or cultural group, and because of the strong formal and informal rules within these groups about how to develop and maintain long-term relationships, it can be difficult for someone from another culture to understand what someone from a high-context culture means by an indirect form of communication. On the other hand, low-context cultures value explicit and direct verbal communication,

and they see clarity as extremely important. All rules, expectations, and social structures will be explicitly articulated in some form (usually, in written form), and the individual will be rewarded more for achieving individual success and less for achieving group success. Therefore, communication in these cultures will be very clear, will eliminate ambiguity, and will allow for flexible interpersonal relationships without the need for meaningful social connection between individuals in the same cultural group. Not only are Hall's distinctions applicable to national cultures, but they can also be applied to organizations, professions, and interactions with or among individuals in a variety of contexts. Often, when there are individuals communicating from differing cultural styles, misunderstandings will arise. Low-context communicators often perceive high-context communicators as being vague, while high-context communicators perceive low-context communicators as being very blunt. Realising such differences will help improve communication across borders and cultures in business, diplomacy, and multicultural environments; therefore, it is necessary to understand how important context and clarity can be in cross-cultural interactions.

2.3. Trompenaars' Cultural Dimensions

The Cultural Dimensions Theory offers us a way to analyse the cultural dimensions across all societies that influence our behaviours, communication styles, and management styles. Trompenaars' Cultural Dimensions Theory, which was developed through extensive research by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner in 1997, identifies a total of seven cultural dimensions which can be used to assess societies in terms of their cultural dimensions. The seven cultural dimensions are grouped into three categories of: human relationships, time orientation, and relationship with the environment. The first cultural dimension of Universalism vs Particularism examines the differences between cultures that support universal

principles (universalist cultures) versus those that prefer to rely on their personal relationships when making and/or understanding decisions (particularist cultures). For example, the United States and the United Kingdom are examples of universalist cultures because they rely heavily upon maintaining consistent standards across cultures. Conversely, China and Russia would be examples of particularist cultures because they allow for and accept flexibility based on the context of the particular situation(s) being considered. The second cultural dimension of Individualism vs Communitarianism examines cultures' perspectives towards viewing themselves as individual or as part of a group. Individualist cultures (individualism) emphasise accomplishments that are solely accomplished by a single individual (most typically true of the western world) versus communitarian cultures (communitarianism) emphasising collective/group accomplishments (often true of many Asian and African cultures). The third cultural dimension of Specific vs Diffuse examines how business people view the boundaries between their professional life and their private life. The Specific orientation (the Netherlands and the United States) maintains clearly defined boundaries between their professional and personal lives; while the Diffuse orientation (China and many of the Arab States) tends to see the two areas of life as operating together and as a result communications are highly dictated by the context of each situation. The last two comparisons can be understood as two-dimensional scales. Additionally, the "Neutral vs. Emotional (Affective)" comparison refers to emotional expression in cultures. Neutral cultures, such as The United Kingdom and Japan, value restraint; however, emotional cultures, such as Mexico and Spain, encourage emotional expression in society. The next comparison is "Achievement vs. Ascription," which addresses how status is granted to individuals. Cultures such as the United States and United Kingdom place

value on individual achievements and accomplishments; however, cultures such as Japan and Italy assign greater status to individuals based on their inherent characteristics, such as their family background or age, than on their achievements. The next area of culture is "Sequential Time vs. Synchronous Time," which evaluates cultural perceptions of time. For example, cultures such as Germany and the United States place value on linear planning (sequential time) and creating plans that they can use to track time. Synchronous time cultures, on the other hand, place less value on strict schedules and create relationships that allow them to have greater flexibility with how time can be used. Finally, the "Internal vs. External Direction" comparison addresses how cultures perceive their environment. Cultures that perceive their environment to be internal to them will seek to control it, while cultures with an external perception of their environment will be more adaptable to environmental forces. This variable has an impact on the way decisions are made and the way leadership is demonstrated across cultures.

2.4. Language and Cultural Barriers in Multicultural Workplaces

Language barriers are among the many barriers in cross-cultural workplaces as demonstrated by Sapar et al. (2018); they studied expatriate and local staff communication at the University of Malaya. Local staff had limited proficiency in the English language and official communications were primarily conducted in Malay; these communication methods created issues with code-switching (changing language systems) and misunderstandings as a result of barriers to receiving essential communications restricted the sense of belonging for both groups. Similarly, Dar (2010) discussed language proficiency differences in a Scandinavian multinational organisation, where employees experienced anxiety about upward communication, which inhibited decision-making and collaboration. In addition to language, other elements of culture such as non-verbal

communication and styles of communication create additional barriers. Hong (2014) explained how non-verbal elements, such as tone and timing, influence message reception differently throughout cultural groups. Misunderstandings resulting from the differences in norms and expectations of the various cultural systems were illustrated by the cafeteria staff at Heathrow Airport, who experienced negative stereotypes of being rude due to the different non-verbal components of communicating. Sapar et al. (2018) also documented how expatriates were often interpreted as being aggressive due to the differences in their style of communicating.

Communication among people from various cultures can be complicated by power dynamics and ethnocentrism. According to Sapar et al. (2018), local employees often expected expatriates to conform to their local customs without taking into account the difficulties they are having adjusting; thus, creating unequal power relations between the two groups where expatriates are blamed for their cultural misunderstandings, and fluency in English is equated to competence while those with lower levels of fluency are marginalized.

Hong (2014) took this a step further by noting that native English speakers tend to dominate conversations in the workplace and use language in a manner that alienates non-native speakers, thereby maintaining a hierarchy within the workplace that has nothing to do with the professional competence of either group. Together, these studies illustrate that developing effective workplace communication in a multi-cultural environment is more than just a matter of sharing a common language; it requires recognizing that there will be differing cultural expectations and actively creating an inclusive workplace that values and incorporates multiple ways of communicating. These three researches stress the

importance of utilizing a number of innovative, layered strategies when attempting to enhance cross-cultural communication. For example, Sapar et al. (2018) suggest implementing some form of pre-orientation programme for both expatriates and local employees with reference to language, social customs; appropriate workplace behaviours, and non-verbal behaviour. They also call for the sharing of critical information amongst employees in a common language accessible to all employees. Dar (2010) supports the use of English as a corporate common business language; however, he cautions that this can create problems. He recommends providing simplified English, redundant communication methods (e.g., written follow-up communications), and including interpreters or bilingual staff. Additionally, he believes all training programs should include cultural awareness components to help interpret messages between different cultures and facilitate cross-cultural interactions.

According to Hong (2014), visual communication is a great way to overcome language barriers because it shows that when working as part of a diverse team, diagrams, models, and infographics may better explain complex ideas than words alone. Participatory mapping tools, GIS software, and visual preference surveys can include participation from stakeholders who might otherwise feel excluded. In an international environment where multicultural teams work together on technical projects, adding visual tools, simplified bilingual documents, cross-cultural briefings, and cultural mediators has been shown to greatly improve mutual understanding, reduce conflicts, and increase collaboration success.

3. Methodology

Using a qualitative research design, this study aims to explore the intercultural communication dynamics between Chinese construction workers and Algerian supervisors at sites where they are working in Algeria. A qualitative approach is

generally considered to be appropriate as it tends to offer deeper levels of understanding of complex social phenomena like human interaction and culture that cannot easily be quantified. The objective of this study is to provide an understanding of the emotional responses, cultural values and contextual meanings that affect communication.

3.1. Research Aims

- To identify the main linguistic and cultural barriers that Chinese workers face in workplace settings.
- To recommend practical approaches to overcome linguistic and cultural difficulties.

3.2 Research Questions

- What are the Linguistic and cultural barriers faced by Chinese construction workers employed in Algeria by both their Algerian work colleagues & supervisors?
- What potential solutions may be suggested by the two parties?

3.3 Sample and Population

The purposive sampling method employed consisted of 8 male Chinese employees who currently are performing construction duties in Huceinia, whose age ranges from 25-50 years and having differing lengths of employment in Algeria. General labor, plumbing, and electrical trades/employment were among the varied trade positions of the sample. By doing so, this will provide an overall assessment of the nature of communication difficulties facing Chinese employees who work within different occupational categories. All sample subjects share a common cultural background while having been a member of diverse employment experiences; thus, they best depict the experiences between the Chinese and Algerian cultures.

3.4. Data Collection Tools

Semi-structured interviews were used primarily to gather data through guided but flexible conversations to gain insights into the participant's daily communication practices, challenges, and ways to overcome cultural misunderstandings. Some areas of focus during the interview included language proficiency as well as verbal/nonverbal modes of communicating and the psychological effects of each of those areas.

Data collection was primarily through semi-structured interviews, enabling guided yet flexible conversations that explored the participants' daily communication practices, challenges, and strategies used to overcome cultural misunderstandings. The interviews addressed language proficiency, verbal and non-verbal communication barriers, and the psychological impacts of these challenges.

3.5. Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke, was implemented to investigate participant narratives using a six-step approach that allows for theme identification instead of establishing pre-defined categories to analyse. The thematic analysis offers the ability to explore the complexities associated with multilingual communication and comprehension between workers and the difficulties they have experienced with communication in a multicultural workplace environment. This research demonstrates the value of qualitative methods in identifying complex dynamics of cross-cultural communication in the workplace.

4.Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Theme 1: Language Barriers in Communication

Language barriers were a major issue in multicultural workplaces, especially between English and French. Participants noted they were reasonably good at French, but their English skills were much weaker. This led to difficulties in formal situations, like meetings and documentation, that needed effective communication.

Misunderstandings from language differences caused errors in technical situations, like confusion about mixing concrete ratios, which delayed work and added costs to the project. One participant mentioned that he could understand numbers but struggled with technical terms, leading to mistakes. He said, "If there is no one to help explain it to you, you will make mistakes." Routine tasks at work, such as getting tools and keeping on schedule, also presented communication problems. These issues caused ongoing stress and frustration for workers. Many Chinese employees used Google Translate to help with basic communication at work. However, it often fell short in precise situations, slowing down work processes and resulting in incorrect translations. To avoid looking incompetent, workers tended to shy away from asking for help, which further deepened communication barriers and increased feelings of isolation.

4.2. Theme 2: Cultural Misunderstandings and Non-Verbal Communication

Participants in workplace interactions have found that nonverbal and cultural misunderstandings often create gaps between employees. For example, in a Chinese setting, avoiding eye contact shows respect. However, many Algerian supervisors see this nonverbal cue as a sign of untrustworthiness. Additionally, silence in Chinese culture signals that a person has thought about what was just said. In contrast, in the Algerian workplace, silence is often viewed as confusion, leading to uncomfortable moments for both groups during work discussions. Another example of cultural differences appears during religious ceremonies. While Chinese workers respected Algerian customs, such as observing Ramadan, many felt isolated by the lack of interest in celebrating Chinese holidays. Misunderstandings also occur with gestures. Algerian workers sometimes misinterpret gestures, such as handing tools with two hands or bowing, which are meant to show respect. Similarly, Chinese workers may misread local gestures as disrespectful. These differences in nonverbal communication show how misunderstandings can create conflict

between the two cultures instead of connection. This highlights the need for a better understanding of cultural differences in a multicultural workplace.

4.3. Theme 3 : Communication Hierarchies and Power Dynamics

The interview participants highlighted a significant power imbalance in the communication process between management and foreign workers, especially Algerian employees. This imbalance stemmed from job hierarchy and cultural and language barriers that influenced who took part in discussions and decision-making. For instance, Chinese workers noted that meetings were held solely in French without translation. This led to their exclusion from important conversations about workplace safety, scheduling, and project management. As a result, they often remained silent in meetings and were viewed as passive workers instead of active contributors. Moreover, when Chinese workers tried to request minor changes to their shifts for cultural reasons, management's lack of response suggested that they were not considered valuable contributors. This attitude discouraged them from voicing their needs. Additionally, the urgent nature of many instructions from management added to the issue. Often, the urgency prevented necessary clarification, making workers less likely to ask questions. This created an environment where obedience was favored over initiative, worsening the already existing communication gap.

4.4. Theme 4: Strategies Used by Chinese Workers to Overcome Barriers

Furthermore, participants' strategies connect with findings from Sapar et al. (2018) and Dar (2010). This shows that workers in linguistically diverse environments create informal communication methods when they lack institutional support. Techniques like using translation apps, gestures, and relying on bilingual colleagues demonstrate resilience, but they do not replace systematic communication methods. These informal approaches may lead to uneven communication dynamics and added pressure on certain employees, especially bilingual peers who often serve as unofficial interpreters. This role can increase stress and productivity problems and might cause conflicts due to misunderstandings. Casual strategies are often

inaccurate, particularly in technical and safety contexts, which can lead to dangerous mistakes. Institutions that ignore structured language and communication support risk harming individual well-being and overall effectiveness. Without regular systems to improve understanding, communication challenges continue and can worsen in high-pressure situations like construction. While informal strategies can help bridge language and cultural gaps, they are not enough on their own. These insights highlight the need for institutions to recognize and engage with the root causes of communication failures in multicultural environments.

Moreover, Hong (2014) argues that communication strategies must consider context and cultural factors. Visual aids and gestures can help overcome language barriers, but they are prone to misinterpretation, especially in critical safety situations. The lack of standardized visuals or multilingual signs means interpretations can differ, creating safety risks.

4.5. Theme 5: Religious and Cultural Practices at the workplaces

This part discusses the cultural alienation felt by Chinese workers on construction sites in Algeria due to lack of acknowledgement of their customs and traditions. Chinese workers have expressed feelings of exclusion because their holiday and food preferences were disregarded unlike their Algerian counterparts, due to their value systems being significantly different according to Hofstede's (1980) cultural distance theory. The differences in cultural norms from Algeria have resulted in an inability to incorporate foreign cultures into society and according to Hong (2014), in order for there to be efforts at true inclusion of minority cultures it is necessary that holidays of those minority cultures are recognised. The non-recognition of Chinese holidays also demonstrates an inadequate level of institutional support for cultural pluralism. Dar (2010) advocates a proactive

approach to manage workplace diversity and to examine the need for cultural competency training to manage differences. At present, there are no clearly defined initiatives to provide cultural competency training or education in Algerian workplaces and therefore there will continue to be a lack of understanding between cultures. The lack of recognition of holidays and the act of separating during meals, even though there is a dietary restriction, show how important it is to have shared rituals that bring people together and help them work as a team. Foreign workers won't be able to bond or get to know each other emotionally if they stop participating in group activities.

4.6. Theme 6: Social Isolation and Emotional Effects

The emotional strain on employees underscores the critical issue of insufficient cross-cultural integration in the workplace. According to Hong (2014), emotional inclusion (feeling valued, recognized, and accepted) is just as important as functional inclusion. Employees who feel alone emotionally are less likely to be interested in their work and stay committed to it. Because of this, emotional safety at work will be important for keeping employees motivated and productive (Sapar et al. 2018). If employees aren't sure if they can work as a team or if they will be included in team dynamics, their morale will drop. This will lead to higher turnover rates, lower performance levels, and possible mental health problems like anxiety and depression. Emotional well-being should be a part of all diversity programs (Dar 2010); an anti-discrimination policy won't work unless it helps people from different cultures get to know each other. The phrase "politely ignored" is a classic example of passive exclusion. This can happen even if the employer doesn't mean to, but it can still have a big negative effect. Cultural fatigue is a term used to describe the overall level of stress someone feels when they have to deal with a culture they don't know. It also shows how mentally and emotionally drained the participants were and that even the smallest problems can cause constant stress if there aren't enough resources or support systems in place.

4.7. Theme 7: The attitudes and responses of Algerian coworkers

The Chinese employees stated they were accommodated and yet experienced a sense of social exclusion in multi-cultural working environments. They could make a distinction between silent acceptance (through consent) and the active facilitation of inclusion (through proactivity). There is an emphasis placed upon creating an environment that is accepting, but also celebrates a multitude of diverse backgrounds at the same time (Hong, 2014). The participants stated that the Algerian employees distanced themselves (through keeping an appropriate amount of personal space) so that any potential conflicts would be avoided. Whilst this created a working environment with less chance of conflict, it created a barrier for further inclusion. This lends credence to Gudykunst's (2005) concept of intergroup anxiety. This can be defined as the apprehension that a person feels when interacting with another group. Due to fear of the potential mistake/offence that will be made, parties distance themselves so as not to increase any opportunities to start new relationships or build understanding. The participants stated that the Algerian employee's behavior did not signal any sense of hostility. This did lead to increased social barriers within the workplace, with Dar (2010) discussing the importance of peer-to-peer communications as part of a often overlooked dimension of social

inclusion, by highlighting the role of local advocates in society, and the importance of their presence or absence in creating social silos in the workplace.

4.8. Theme 8: Recommendations for Improvement

All of the suggestions from the participants echo what has been explored within existing literature. For example, Sapar et al. (2018) maintain that communication problems must be addressed through multi-faceted measures consisting of capacity building of expatriates and integration of host-country employees. Language development is emphasized as a powerful empowering mechanism to be addressed. In the area of feedback mechanisms, Dar (2010) emphasizes that channels of feedback and resolution should be systematically in place, which could be developed by using the services of cultural consultants or liaison officers to implement a systemic means of addressing differences in cultural behaviors and communication barriers to increase trust and to retain minority employees. In line with the suggestions from participants, Hong (2014) argues that awareness about the cultures of other individuals must be built into an organization's workplace culture. This is suggested by the participant's proposed solutions through the implementation of orientation workshops and cultural exchanges as means to provide insight into varying behaviors without rendering judgments in favor of an openness for understanding and, in effect, collaboration within the workplace. The participants' recommendation to make use of technology

is echoed by Dar's (2010) notion that technology is crucial in multicultural workplaces as it aids with utilizing visual aids and applications that translate from one language to another, thus easing the workload of bilingual employees.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this research concludes that the problems of language barrier and culture gap significantly affect communication and productivity within the multicultural enterprise. For Chinese workers in Algeria, miscommunication, poor participation, and social isolation affect their communication and productivity. However, the weakness of informal support mechanism is still a key issue. Therefore, efforts to develop multicultural awareness, language support, and integrative communication methods would lead to a better integration of workplace.

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